

# Is There a Shortage of Ministers in America?

## The Other Side of the Widely Discussed Question

### By a Practical Minister Who Is Working at It

THE recent announcement by one of our widely circulated reviews (*Literary Digest*, July 16, Page 30) that "Ten thousand Protestant pulpits are expected to be vacant next year because of the lack of students for the ministry, as displayed by records of attendance at theological seminaries," is startling to church people who are satisfied with mere headlines for final authority. Before entering into the discussion, and giving some facts as they really are, it is well to remember:

(1) That church news is the most incorrectly reported news in America. It is always big news in every way and too many reporters are like the blind men who went to visit the elephant and each brought back his own version of what an elephant was like. All denominations suffer greatly from badly reported news by those who are too busy to get all the facts, or who try to interpret the report through terms of their own denomination. Even among the leaders in the denominations we still find men who at times are not unlike Elijah under the juniper tree.

#### Jesus Chose Workingmen

(2) In this particular case the secular journals were partly excusable, for they got their information from statistics of theological seminaries which are specially set aside for training of ministers. For the comfort and consolation of the learned professors in theological schools, I refer them to their own historical departments to find that theological schools have never been a reliable thermometer or barometer of religious conditions or growth. What the theological schools have really revealed is that they are failing to get the students, and instead of suspecting the students are at fault, they might well look to their own work. They should at least remember that God raised up judges in Israel from unexpected quarters; Jesus did not select his disciples from either the schools of the Pharisees or Sadducees, but plain everyday workingmen, and many of our foremost bishops and leaders in all churches never completed a theological course in a high-grade seminary.

(3) Five years ago, after visiting several theological schools, I wrote an article published in one of the leading magazines, "Do Our Theological Seminaries Meet Modern Needs?" I found seminaries unpopular with many men even attending them. The complaints I heard were such as indicated restlessness among the students, and chafing under old rules and standards and regulations. They were splendid places to polish fossils, but not suitable places to awaken and inspire red-blooded men who had to meet real conditions as they are in real life today in the ministry. The schools were a generation behind their times, as many students looked at it, and men are going into the ministry direct from colleges and secular universities without three additional years at a theological school. Statistics will show that in the largest Protestant denomination in America—the Methodist Episcopal—more than 75 per cent of the ministers go directly into the ministry without entering a theological school. I am disposed to believe that similar conditions exist in the next largest Protestant denomination—the Baptists.

#### Many Never Graduated

SINCE the Methodist Episcopal church began work in the United States it has elected and ordained 93 men to the high office of bishop. Foremost among these were men who were schooled for law, like Bishop Emory and others, or medicine or educational work. Probably half of them never graduated from a seminary. I need not add that our foremost evangelists, like Mr. Moody and Mr. Sunday, never graduated from a theological school. I would not call attention to these facts except that constantly in almost every alarm sent out about a shortage of ministers, theological schools are taken as barometers and thermometers of religious conditions. Understand me, a close student myself, I believe in theological schools, although they did not do God's work and were no criterions in the days of Jesus, Martin Luther, John Wesley or D. L. Moody.

The real test of preacher shortage is the work needed and men to do it. Times change. Methods of work change. Amount of work required changes with generations. God does not need nor call men like so many fossils to fill places others have filled when the work others did is finished.

Church work, like all other work, is in a period of readjustment. Where the minister was the sole religious worker in the days of our grandfathers, we have today a Young Men's Christian Association with several workers in almost every town. A single denomination has nearly 500,000 trained Sunday school teachers and workers, giving each scholar as many minutes of religious instruction a week as the old-fashioned preacher once gave in a month to the entire congregation. Almost every newspaper carries as much religious news and sermon matter in some form as a minister once carried in a single church service.

The automobile and improved roads have made it possible for one minister to do as much in many places as two ministers could do 10 years ago. As it has made possible the consolidation of schools, so it has done with churches. Quite a few small struggling churches which never did more than maintain an existence have consolidated, or closed their churches entirely, and the congregation now goes to the town

church to the profit of all concerned. A still larger number will do this within the next decade.

The automobile has made it possible for one minister to serve several weak country churches formerly requiring several ministers. The growing intelligence of the congregations themselves helps to this. Almost any congregation has several college graduates and school teachers and persons who can hold a prayer meeting, to the profit of themselves and others.

In still other cases where four preachers have been quartered in a town of 300 persons to gratify denominational pride, or the contrariness of local church officials, some of the preachers are having religious sense and judgment enough to go elsewhere, to fields which need them more. Much of the constant cry about vacant pulpits might be spent on churches which should never have been built, or which have served their day. Almost every little country town in America 50 years old has one or more such churches. Except where they are preserved for historic associations or social use, liquidation should take place at once and we should charge them off the ledger.

Present-day economics and business will not much longer run churches for the sake of running. They must show profit for God and His Kingdom or get out of the way. The church is God's Factory, its members are the workmen and the preacher is the foreman. Each factory must show profit for God or close its doors. The church as a whole is rising to this conception and individual congregations must do so. The Protestant churches of America have done more for world salvation in the last three years than in 10 previous years, shortage or no shortage of ministers. Religious leaders of every denomination concede this.

This directs attention to the fact of efficiency of the average preacher and that it is far greater than a decade ago. That is, he is turning out more goods whatever may be his preaching ability.

The reported causes offered for the shortage surprise me more than the alleged shortage of ministers. I have preached for 20 years and in the last decade have tried to keep close contact with church conditions in the East. Five years ago I took a whole year to study them in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and smaller cities. In 1919 I took a trip through Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and other western towns and cities. I have personally known more than 300 ministers since I began preaching 20 years ago. With this knowledge I confess nothing but surprise when some editors are constantly assigning starvation pay as the cause of few recruits. To this they add old age, poverty, hard times for family, and lack of social prestige.

#### Not After Big Pay

IN ALL my life I have never known a recruit who entered the ministry for big pay or was kept out of it by poor pay. Not a single case have I met. It is more a matter of consecration than compensation. Big consecration forgets compensation. No compensation can draw a man to the ministry if he has no consecration. Many men have had to abandon the ministry after entering it to support or educate large families, but this did not affect new recruits of consecrated young men.

It is almost a safe guess that 90 out of every 100 Methodist or Baptist ministers who started to preach 10 years ago or more, did so on less salary than \$500 a year. Many of them have since become bishops and church leaders. The kingdom of Christ first, and the Kingdom will support every worker who is worth it if he is really needed.

Moreover, the quality of preachers is more important than the number. Quality is determined almost entirely by consecration and common sense. Eleven disciples—not one of them a graduate of a theological seminary of their day—started out after the elimination of the traitor among them, and the death of their Lord, and they changed world conditions in government, living conditions and religious life, because eleven of them were willing to die for their faith and consecration to Him "who had not where to lay His head." Nor do I read that our Lord promised them anything except a chance to work for Him and His Kingdom.

But where is the poor pay? A minister myself, I have never served a congregation in my life which did not give me a better home, better food, better clothing, better opportunity for self-expression, better social prestige than was enjoyed by one-half of the congregation that gave it to me. Lest I may be an exception I challenge all the editors in America to show me a preacher in good standing of any standard denomination who does not have a better home, better food, better clothing, better social surroundings than one-half of the congregation he serves. Is not that more than their Lord had? Then why the cry? What more should a follower of Him "who had not where to lay His head" expect? Moreover, the experience I have quoted above is the experience of every preacher to whom I have put the question.

True enough, some preachers do not become millionaires. Neither do some of their flock. The fact is, I have buried a few lawyers, doctors and business men who did not leave enough money to pay their debts, which causes me to add that ministers should create no debts but live on what they get if they have to wear overalls and work with their hands at times as did Paul—a thing that few of us have to do.

There are some real obstacles to obtaining recruits

for the ministry. Among them I have found the following:

1. Growing autocracy of government in church work in all denominations.
2. Growing helplessness of the minister who is becoming a cog in church machinery.
3. Educational requirements some cannot meet.
4. Ecclesiastical politics and politicians.
5. Favoritism in denominations, which claim to be free of ecclesiastical politicians.
6. Unsatisfactory lives of men higher up.
7. Selfish ambitions among men, where they are not expected.
8. Constant money hunting required of ministers.
9. Money drives, which, I am persuaded, caused many efficient ministers to retire from the active work because they were unable or unwilling to stand the pressure.

While the above list is long, it probably is no greater than at any other time in the history of the church. Human nature is human nature everywhere and in all times.

#### Minister Growing Helpless

THE growing helplessness of the minister because of the growing autocracy above him which he dare not displease, and the same in his congregation which he must consider lest he be ground between the upper and under millstone, is quite serious to men who have been in the work, but not considered by those who are entering it. The chief damage it does to recruiting ministers is when it cools the enthusiasm of the old preacher acting as enlistment officer.

However, the tide is turning. There can be no denomination without the preacher in the pulpit. There can be no bishops, church boards, church offerings, church drives without him; and he has it in his power to correct every evil named above. The pendulum seems ready to swing the other way and it may restore the preacher in the pulpit to his former power and glory.

But why argue the case of "preacher shortage" before the facts and evidence are submitted? Simply because so much has been said by so many editors about it from the standpoint of theological seminaries, past pay and other false viewpoints. In addition, readjustment in church work and church conditions may make an apparent decrease within the next generation. However, that time is not yet. Let us look at the facts and figures and evidence as given by statistical authorities in all standard works.

In spite of the fact, that fewer ministers are needed to do the same work as in former times:

That church membership is constantly growing;  
That slavery and saloons have both been abolished;  
That religious knowledge is disseminated through newspapers, graphophones, summer schools, and books as never before; let us see if 10,000 pulpits will be vacant next year or the year after.

Statistics show the following conditions in America for 30 years:

|                               | 1890       | 1900       | 1910       | 1919        |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Total number of ministers...  | 111,036    | 143,201    | 170,153    | 193,769     |
| Total communicants .....      | 20,618,307 | 27,383,804 | 35,332,776 | 41,491,989  |
| Total number population ..... | 62,947,307 | 75,994,575 | 91,972,266 | 105,683,108 |

In 29 years the church communicants have more than doubled.

In 29 years ministers have nearly doubled.

In 29 years the population far from it.

Where we had one minister for every 560 persons in the United States in 1890 we now have one for every 528 of the population.

#### Denies There Is a Shortage

THE average church membership for each minister has increased from 185 members to 205.

The ministerial efficiency per minister has more than doubled in 30 years.

Nearly \$500,000 has been raised for world salvation in the last three years. All this has been done in World War conditions which took 4,000,000 young men from home and home churches and left more than 50,000 dead in France.

All this has been done in spite of the fact that thousands of ministers were taken out of pulpits to serve as chaplains and in Y. M. C. A. work in the army.

All this has been done in spite of the fact that in former wars in our history there were terrible losses for the churches.

But is there a real shortage of ministers in any part of the country which did not exist before? I challenge any editor in the United States to find a community of 200 persons which has been settled permanently for two years and is five miles from a minister of some kind. There probably are such, but also there are consecrated men who would like to serve them.

In the days of President Roosevelt he was reported to have said that he could address a letter to "The Methodist Minister" at any post office in the United States and some Methodist minister would reply. And there are good Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Lutheran ministers and ministers of all kinds in addition to Methodist ministers.